

GENDER AND HUMAN RIGHTS MONITOR
Slide to Christian Nationalism:
CPAC's Global Expansion into Mexico

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Summary

From November 18 to 19, the U.S.-based Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) will hold its first forum in Mexico. The event is hosted by Eduardo Verástegui through his organization [Movimiento Viva México](#) (Long Live Mexico Movement). Verástegui is an ultra-conservative Catholic activist and Mexican model, singer, and *telenovela* actor who turned to right-wing politics in the early 2000s after moving to Los Angeles to pursue a career in Hollywood. Verástegui's political star rose exponentially in 2020 when [President Trump nominated him for a key position in his administration](#). The CPAC Mexico conference will likely fulfill two ambitions: advancing Verástegui's political aspirations and establishing a CPAC beachhead in Mexico.

[CPAC's history](#) goes back nearly half a century, to January 1974. A year after the Supreme Court decision *Roe v. Wade* established a constitutional right to abortion, the [American Conservative Union](#) (ACU) inaugurated its first Conservative Political Action Conference. CPAC [promotes Christian nationalist narratives](#) in the context of a capitalist creed and American exceptionalism and individualism. The conference has irrevocably shaped the U.S. right-wing political agenda and is considered a bellwether for Republican and far-right politics, trends, and priorities. Today, the event brings together different strands of the U.S.—and now global—far-right by the thousands.

As the nexus for right-wing activism and politics, the event serves as a kingmaker for U.S. Republicans. Ronald Reagan delivered the inaugural speech in 1974; six years later he was elected president. Almost four decades later, [Donald Trump gave his first CPAC speech in 2011](#), and was elected president five years later. CPAC is also a space where political conservative aspirants congregate to gain insight about where to stand on certain key issues, including anti-rights trends and right-wing politics. CPAC, which once attempted to mask the racist and nativist aspects of U.S. conservatism, has, in the lead-up to and following the Trump presidency, slid fully into white Christian nationalism.

Additionally, CPAC no longer operates domestically, launching its international expansion in 2017 with a first meeting in Japan. Since then, it has hosted many international conferences, courting authoritarian governments, white nationalist extremists, and other anti-rights activists. Following CPAC Japan, conferences have been held in Australia, South Korea, Israel, Hungary, Brazil, and now Mexico.

CPAC Mexico stands out for several reasons. The Mexican presidency is currently held by Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who is considered a liberal progressive, and the country is one of the region's pioneers on legalizing same sex marriage (2010) and abortion (2021). Still, there is an appetite in Mexico for the regressive social issues CPAC acolytes embrace. These positions are represented in the *Partido Acción Nacional* (National Action Party, PAN), Mexico's conservative political party's platform. But there are also new political movements vying to occupy this space.

[CPAC is hoping to tap into](#) and foster this homegrown base and use it as a launching pad to expand throughout the region.

Background and international expansion

While CPAC officially launched in January 1974, rightwing movements had been building the previous decade following conservative losses in the 1964 U.S. presidential election. CPAC's parent organization, the American Conservative Union (ACU), was instrumental in rebuilding and reshaping these movements following the Watergate scandal, which ended the Nixon presidency when he resigned from office in August of 1974, two years into his second term.

The 1974 CPAC conference launched the “New Right” for U.S. conservatives, and it played a pivotal role in Ronald Reagan’s ascension to the presidency in the 1980 election. Reagan was a figurehead in fortifying the so-called “Moral Majority” and the rise of the Christian, mainly evangelical, right wing in the United States.

CPAC attracts thousands of attendees, and the Trump era has reinvigorated the movement. The conference now holds gatherings throughout the year and—galvanized by recent global far-right victories—CPAC is expanding internationally. In 2017, it held its first gathering outside the U.S. in Japan in partnership with the Japanese Conservative Union. Two years later, in 2019, CPAC expanded to Australia, South Korea, and Brazil. Those countries have now hosted multiple CPAC events of their own.

CPAC has invested heavily in Brazil and Hungary. It held its first Brazilian gathering in 2019, the same year Jair Bolsonaro became president, with follow-up conferences in September 2021 and June 2022. In 2022, CPAC made inroads into Eastern Europe and the Middle East, hosting meetings in Hungary in May, headlined by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, and an inaugural gathering in Israel in July, which was keynoted by the U.S.-based right-wing pundit Ben Shapiro.

CPAC has recently come under scrutiny in early 2022 for accepting tens of thousands of dollars in fees from foreign interests—including for advocating on legislation before the U.S. Congress—without registering as foreign agents in possible violation of the disclosure law known as the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA). Moreover, concerns have been raised about its practices organizing CPAC events outside of the United States.

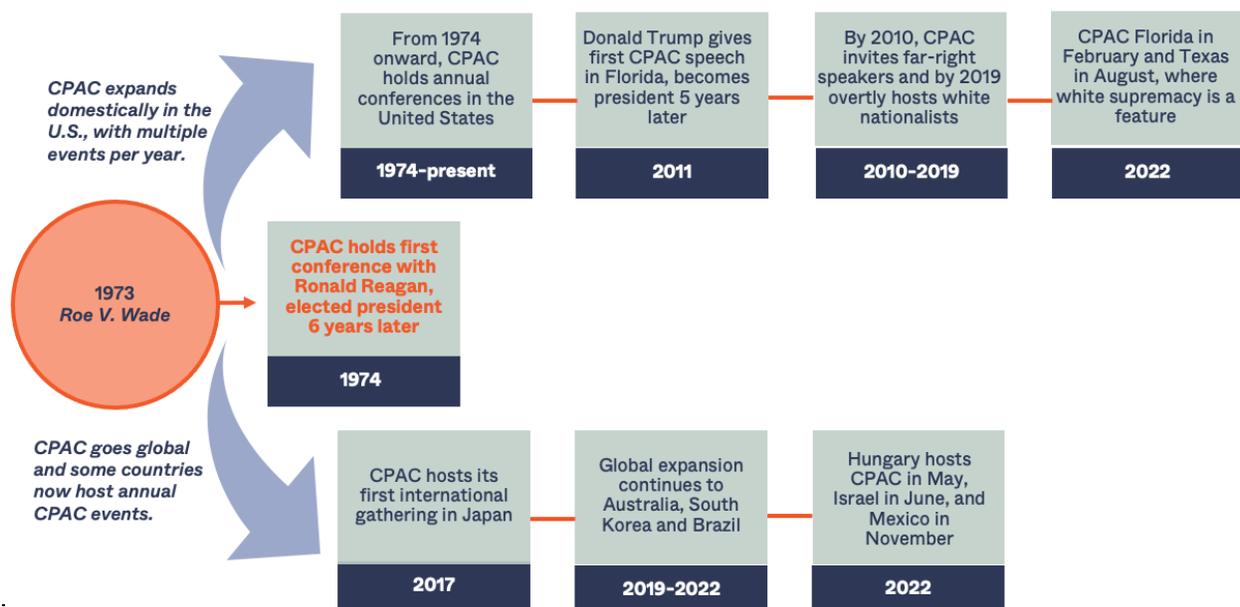
This globalization of CPAC, seemingly in conflict with its foundational American exceptionalism, has expanded the breeding grounds for U.S. alt-right values and the global sharing of extreme right populist strategies.

CPAC Mexico was originally scheduled for September 2022 but was moved to immediately after the U.S. mid-term elections. Organizers clearly hope to use the momentum from the U.S. elections to animate the crowd in Mexico City. Regardless the outcome of the U.S. elections, Verástegui has a clear vision for the conference. Speaking in August at CPAC Texas 2022, [he said that CPAC Mexico](#) “is a unique opportunity to build alliances between defenders of liberty in the hemisphere and to unite against those who want to impose socialism in the region.”

CPAC and White Nationalism

Since its inception, CPAC has grappled internally with tensions between traditional conservatives and harder-right extremists, while trying to maintain a public face that avoids displays of overt racism. CPAC leadership tried to keep nativism out of the conference, focusing instead on immigration reform, views that were faithfully telegraphed by U.S. Tea Party activists and others.¹ Though [CPAC maintains that it is not racist nor white nationalist](#), it has [welcomed extreme right-wing activists](#) over the years, exposing how the U.S. conservative movement has never disentangled from white supremacy.

Over the last decade, CPAC dropped the pretense and submitted to the hard-right fringe of the conservative movement. Between 2013 and 2014, extreme right-wing elements started hosting their own gatherings near the CPAC venue. There were initially internal clashes during the Obama era between “birther” supporters—the conspiracy fueled by Trump that President Obama was not born in the United States—and the “[never-Trumpers](#).” The birthers won and by 2019, CPAC was welcoming white nationalists to its conference.



¹ The Tea Party was a [fiscally conservative political movement](#) within the Republican Party that began in 2009 amid a groundswell of populist anger that blazed the trail for Trump in the United States.

As the U.S. far-right has embraced the [racist Great Replacement conspiracy theory](#),² openly platforming authoritarian leaders like Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro, white supremacy is a feature and mobilizer of the movement at CPAC. Having warmly welcomed white supremacy, CPAC is now moving to support anti-democratic leaders and initiatives who share these values, including at CPACs outside of the United States.



CPAC in Mexico

CPAC Mexico will be held in Mexico City November 18 to 19, 2022, following the mid-term elections in the United States. Mexico is the second Latin American country to host a CPAC. The first was [Brazil](#) under the leadership of Eduardo Bolsonaro, federal deputy and son of President Jair Bolsonaro. Eduardo Verástegui, a well-known ultra-conservative Catholic model, singer, and actor, is organizing and hosting CPAC Mexico.

Verástegui is a veteran of previous CPAC's where he has shared the stage with former U.S. President Donald Trump and his political advisor Steve Bannon, as well as Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán. Under Verástegui's leadership, CPAC Mexico is following the script of previous

² This racist conspiracy narrative that originated in Europe falsely asserts there is an effort to replace white populations in certain countries. It has been adapted to contexts as a xenophobic, anti-immigration rallying cry.

conferences. The speaker lineup includes well-known ultra-right political leaders, many of whom are linked to anti-gender and anti-reproductive rights activism.

The roster of CPAC Mexico speakers from the United States includes political actors close to Trump, like Republican representatives Mark Green and Marjorie Taylor Greene. The latter is rumored to be under consideration as [Trump's vice presidential running mate in the 2024 elections](#). Bannon is also on the CPAC Mexico docket, though it is unclear if he will attend as he [was recently sentenced to four months in jail](#) for contempt of Congress for refusing to collaborate with the January 6th Commission investigating the U.S. 2021 Capitol riots.

Joining them is [Gladden Pappin](#), a professor at the U.S. Catholic University Notre Dame and an early supporter of Trump. Pappin serves as an academic bridge of the U.S. conservative movement to Hungary where he teaches at the Mathias Corvinus Collegium (MCC) in Budapest. [MCC is a controversial educational project](#); Prime Minister Orbán has invested almost two billion dollars of government funding into the university with the expectation that it will build a cadre of ultra-conservative graduates who will promote and defend his illiberal ideologies.

In addition to Pappin, MCC will be well represented in CPAC Mexico by [Miklos Lukacs](#), [Balázs Orbán](#), and Rodrigo Ballester. Ballester, a Spanish national, is MCC's director of its European Studies Center, and Balázs Orbán (no relation to Prime Minister Viktor Orbán) leads MCC's board while doubling as the prime minister's political director. Rounding out the large Hungarian contingent to CPAC Mexico is [Gergely Gulyás](#), Minister of the Prime Minister's Office, and [Miklós Szánthó](#), president of CPAC Hungary and director of [The Center for Fundamental Rights](#) whose mission is to preserve Christian traditions while countering "human rights-fundamentalism."

CPAC Mexico also includes a high number of past and future political aspirants, including Chile's former presidential candidate [José Antonio Kast](#), who, since losing the election to Gabriel Boric in 2021, turned to chairing the international, ultra-conservative [Political Network for Values \(PNfV\)](#); and Argentinian [Javier Milei](#), a conservative libertarian economist with an emerging political career and presidential aspirations. Also, slated to make an appearance is the unsuccessful 2021 French extreme-right presidential candidate Éric Zemmour.

Heading the lineup is former Polish president and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Lech Walesa, an incongruous choice but one which, according to Poland's leading anti-racist organization [Never Again](#), is intended to soften the extremism of the conference. Rafal Pankowski of Never Again [has asked Walesa to reconsider his decision to participate](#), stating "This is a big mistake that could affect Lech Walesa's reputation."

Verástegui's Rise to Anti-Rights Politician

Eduardo Verástegui's religious, political, and artistic aspirations first converged around 2005-2006 when he produced and starred in *Bella*, a movie with an anti-abortion agenda. From there, he expanded his connections with anti-gender organizations and activists, while consolidating partnerships with key conservative, far-right politicians in the United States, Europe, and Latin America.

Today, Verástegui continues making conservative propaganda films,³ while devoting much of his time to his political and philanthropic ventures, which are primarily focused on anti-abortion initiatives and combating child sex trafficking.⁴ Verástegui has also participated in direct action. In 2008 he volunteered as a “[pro-life counselor](#)” for the U.S. organization [40 Days for Life](#), a global anti-abortion project that sets up camps in front of reproductive health clinics in order to prevent women from getting care. Verástegui's anti-abortion activism was sufficiently well-known that in 2009 he won [the “Hazte Oír Award.”](#)⁵ Granted by the Spanish organization of the same name, *Hazte Oír* was founded by the ultra-conservative, Catholic activist Ignacio Arsuaga, who, with his campaign director Luis Losada, have been linked as key players in the secret, Mexican paramilitary organization [El Yunque](#) (the Anvil).



Eugenio Nasarre, Spanish People's Party deputy and member of the Parliamentary Group for Life and Dignity; Ignacio Arsuaga; founder and president of CitizenGO; and Verástegui (right) at the Hazte Oír Awards ceremony. July 4, 2009. (Photo CC BY-SA 2.0, HazteOir.org).

³ He produced the anti-abortion film [Unplanned](#), based on the memoir of U.S. anti-abortion activist [Abby Johnson](#), and in 2018 began production of the movie [Sound of Freedom](#).

⁴ In 2007, while living in Los Angeles, Verástegui founded, with members of his family, [Manto de Guadalupe](#) (Mantle of the Virgin of Guadalupe), a Catholic group that organized religious missions to provide health care services to communities living in extreme poverty in countries around the world. Abby Johnson worked with Verástegui at *Manto de Guadalupe*. Johnson is also one of the confirmed speakers at CPAC Mexico.

⁵ In an [interview](#) in Madrid, Spain, Verástegui described discouraging women from having abortions.

In 2019, Verástegui used his artistic capital to advance his political ambitions. [He was the executive producer](#) of the anti-abortion film *Unplanned*, which was [partially funded by U.S. businessman and activist Mike Lindell](#), known as the “My Pillow Guy,” who infamously supported and financed President Trump’s attempts to overturn the results of the U.S. 2020 election. [Verástegui toured Mexico](#) promoting *Unplanned* while building partnerships with political leaders and local authorities in several Mexican states to push back against the popular movement to decriminalize abortion in the country.⁶ He subsequently founded the organization [Movimiento Viva México](#) (Long Live Mexico Movement) an entity through which he now conducts all his political activities.

By the following year, Verástegui had come to the attention of President Trump. In July 2020, Trump named Verástegui [a member of the White House’s Advisory Commission on Hispanic Prosperity](#),⁷ and the following year he was brought into the CPAC fold at the [July 2021 CPAC in Dallas, Texas](#). He has since been a [feature at CPACs](#), returning to [Texas and Florida](#).⁸

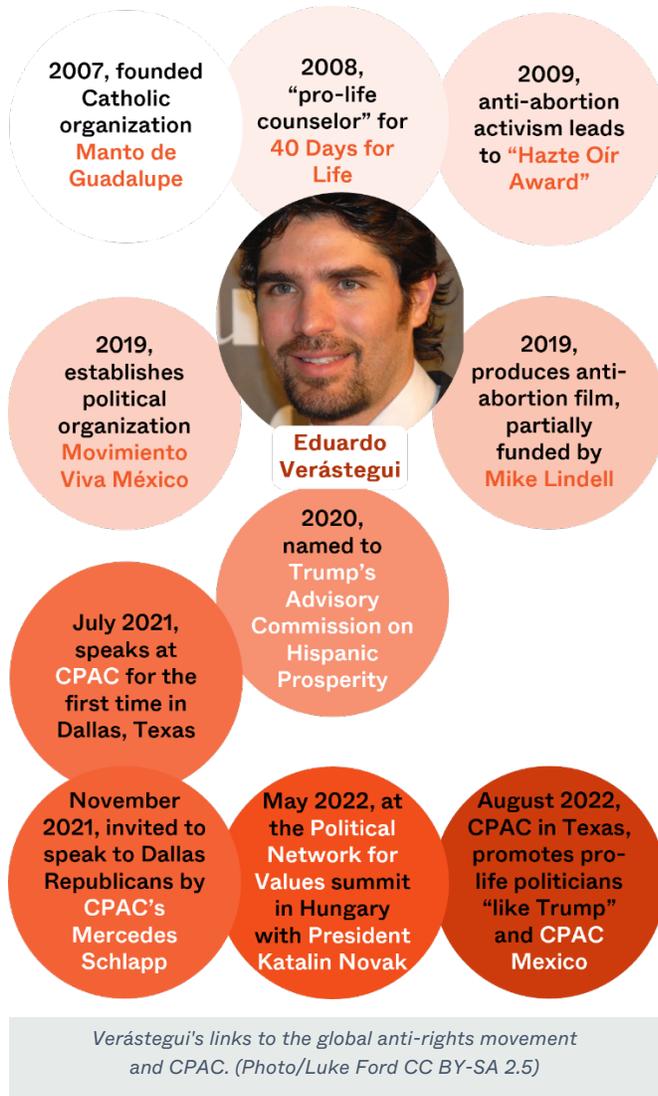
Verástegui’s speeches usually follow a formula: he raises the alarm about the “expansion of socialism in Latin America,” calling out Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua, all of which are regular features of conservative fears; and warns of trouble down the line in Argentina, Chile, and Colombia. At the July 2021 CPAC, Verástegui closed his speech by announcing his plans to host CPAC Mexico in 2022. In August 2022 at yet another CPAC in Texas, [Verástegui invited](#) the audience to vote for pro-life politicians like Donald Trump and promised that CPAC Mexico would be a celebration of conservatives’ victory in the U.S. mid-term elections.



⁶ In 2021 the [Mexican Supreme Court](#) determined that abortion was not a crime.

⁷ Verástegui, is a staunch Trump supporter. In January 2021, following the violence and insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, Verástegui was [criticized for a tweet supporting Trump](#).

⁸ In November 2021, Verástegui presented at an [event hosted by the Dallas Country Republican Party](#) in Texas. He was invited by Mercedes Schlapp, a CPAC senior fellow and a FOX News correspondent, and former Trump White House director of strategic communications. She is married to Matt Schlapp, president of the ACU and of CPAC, who will attend CPAC Mexico.



Verástegui’s political star is rising, and it is nurtured in part by his associations outside of Mexico. In May 2022 he traveled to Budapest, Hungary to participate in the [2022 Transatlantic Summit IV](#) hosted by the international, ultra-conservative [PNfV](#).⁹

He uses these relationships to legitimize his standing in the rightwing political ecosystem, regularly posting photographs of himself with American leaders like Trump, Pence, and Bannon, and others like [Katalin Novák](#), president of Hungary and former president of the PNfV, or with his Mexican friend [Patricio Slim \(also known as Patrick Slim\)](#), son of multimillionaire Carlos Slim and one of the main funders of the anti-gender movement in Latin America.

Verástegui relishes playing the role of a connected political operator and amplifier of the ultra-conservative agenda set by CPAC, Trump, and others, all of which helps strengthen his image and political aspirations. CPAC Mexico is his most [politically viable project](#) yet.

⁹ Verástegui presented his project against trafficking and showed a trailer of the film *Sound of Freedom*. His presentation was notable because he unexpectedly [invited U.S. actor Mel Gibson to join him](#).

CPAC and Far-Right Actors Emerging in Mexico

While the *Partido Acción Nacional* (National Action Party, PAN) has historically represented the established political rightwing in Mexico, there are several emerging extremist political movements vying to enter the arena who see CPAC Mexico as an opportunity to strengthen their visibility. Of particular concern is [México Republicano](#) (Republican Mexico), a movement led by its director Juan Iván Peña Neder, its spokesperson [Gricha Raether Palma](#), and the American [Larry Rubin](#), who has advocated for *México Republicano* to be a “[binational political party](#).”

Peña Neder is a troubling figure whose political life has been trailed by accusations of sexual violence, racism, and corruption, and embracing fascism. Peña Neder served in the Ministry of the Interior during President Felipe Calderón Hinojosa’s administration of 2006 to 2012.¹⁰ A professed admirer of Adolf Hitler, it was during this time that he founded *México Despierta* (Wakeup Mexico), a [neo-fascist and anti-Semitic organization](#) that advocated for the sterilization of indigenous peoples.¹¹ In 2013, *La Jornada*, a respected Mexican newspaper with national circulation [published a photograph](#) of Peña Neder standing in front of a sword and a Crusader shield, with his right arm outstretched, making the Nazi salute.

In 2011, Peña Neder was imprisoned for his part in the [gang rape of his ex-wife](#). He was deemed a “[dangerous subject](#)” and transferred to a maximum-security prison. Two years later he and the two other accused gained [early release](#) from prison following apparent interventions from high-level PAN officials. Peña Neder has also been [accused of corruption](#) related to the management of illegal casinos, and taking advantage of his government position during his time at the Ministry of the Interior.

The ranks of *México Republicano* also include Juan Dabdoub Giacoman, founder and president of [Consejo Mexicano de la Familia](#) (Mexican Family Council). Like Peña Neder, Giacoman also has a sordid history of violence and rightwing advocacy. In 2017 he partnered on an anti-LGBTI public relations campaign created and exported by the Spanish ultra-Catholic organizations *Hazte Oír* and CitizenGO; leading a [tour around Mexico](#) with a bus emblazoned with discriminatory messages against LGBTI people and against comprehensive sexuality education. Giacoman was previously the spokesperson for the [Frente Nacional por la Familia](#) (National Front for the Family), which kicked him out in 2017 for [publicly assaulting a woman](#).

¹⁰ The ultra-Catholic paramilitary organization [El Yunque had the most influence](#) within Mexican political and governmental structures during the period governed by the PAN from 2000 to 2012, allowing those like Peña Neder to act with impunity. This influence was central to the growth of the Spanish anti-rights organizations [Hazte Oír and CitizenGO](#).

¹¹ [Larry Rubin](#) is the U.S. representative of the Republican Party in Mexico and president of the board of directors of [The American Society](#). His name was floated as a possible contender for U.S. ambassador to Mexico under Trump, but that position eventually went to Christopher Landau. Both Rubin and Landau will attend CPAC Mexico.

México Republicano triangulates with Spain through [Pedro Cobo Pulido](#), a Spaniard naturalized in Mexico. Pulido is the founder and director of [Sublevados](#), a conservative political platform that seeks to influence the cultural sphere and train a new cadre of conservative youth. In June 2021, in [a letter](#) addressed to the Vox political party in Spain, *México Republicano* expressed its willingness to join the Madrid Charter, Vox's political manifesto to expand its ultraconservative influence in Latin America.

México Republicano is emerging as a [binational party](#) and they are currently working to establish a local political party in the state of [Chihuahua](#). They will likely leverage their presence at CPAC Mexico to grow their party and [consolidate](#) power at the federal level by 2025. In May 2022, Peña Nader announced that *México Republicano's* national committee was granting its [full support to CPAC Mexico](#).

Some CPAC Mexico participants bring a lower profile, but equally troubling rightwing baggage and political ambition. Mexican state-level deputies [Elsa Méndez and Carlos Leal](#) have a shared history of pushing ultra-conservative policies and initiatives against reproductive rights, comprehensive sexuality education, and LGBTI rights. Neither is currently supported by a political party or movement, which is why Leal founded [Creemos](#) (We Believe), an organization which he aspires to grow politically.

CPAC Mexico will also give a voice to a sizable bloc of ultra-conservative Mexican activists. This includes Guillermo Torres Quiroz, chief editor of [Saber Votar](#) and of [Hazte Sentir](#); Aarón Lara Sánchez, president of the evangelical network [Ibero-American Congress for Life and Family](#); [Rodrigo Iván Cortés](#), president of the *Frente Nacional por la Familia* and vice president of PNFV; Ángel Soubervielle, founder of the anti-abortion organization [Pasos por la Vida](#) (Steps through Life) and director of the social pressure platform [Actívate](#); Carlos Ramírez, the founder of the Catholic movement [ProLife Army](#); and Emilio Yitzhak, president of the previously mentioned platform of *Sublevados*. Yitzhak [has called for acts of violence](#) to defend conservative ideologies and projects. Following Brazil's October 2022 presidential elections where Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva beat out Bolsonaro, Yitzhak [posted](#) that "Bolsonaro should bring out the tanks." All the above are variously trying to influence elections, mobilize the public, or coordinate lobbying campaigns.

CPAC's Implications for Mexico and Beyond

CPAC's international expansion in the last five years is in line with other transnational rightwing movements that are establishing political networking centers driven by perceived conservative fears of immigration, socialism, cancel culture, and wokeness. CPAC Mexico's inclusion of concerning projects like *México Republicano* and *Creemos* signals its openness to mainstreaming extremist political groups whose leadership has a history of racism, violence, and fascism.

As a platform for gathering and connecting far-right political parties, thought leaders, and activists who promote an ideology that mixes neoliberal, nationalism with religious and political anxieties, CPAC reinforces the feeling of belonging and legitimacy for global conservative movements. This fusion sets up frameworks for political action while reinforcing and perpetuating gender stereotypes and inequalities, as well as discrimination and intolerance against specific populations, including women, the LGBTI community, migrants, and historically marginalized groups. This is borne out by the people and movements featured in this report.

CPAC Mexico is a crucial platform for Verástegui to strengthen his image and political capital. When [Verástegui spoke at CPAC Texas in August 2022](#), he said “Latin America is burning; the destructive fire of socialism is quickly spreading throughout the region putting at risk democracy and fundamental freedoms.” The goal, he said, was to “destroy the Judeo-Christian history of Latin America.” But, he reassured the crowd, “we will work hard to elect politicians who are pro-life like President Trump,” and he closed by promising to make Mexico and America great again.

Donald Trump famously kicked off his presidential campaign in 2015 by attacking Mexico, “They are not our friends, believe me,” [he said](#). “They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.” For Trump and his CPAC acolytes, the world is bifurcated into good and bad people, and CPAC has found its “good” Mexicans. Verástegui’s embrace of Trumpism makes this all possible, and as CPAC gatherings outside the United States increase, so does the spread of its nativist, Christian nationalist agenda.

That Verástegui and other Mexicans are so entrenched with a movement that acts against the needs and best interests of Mexicans, and that includes fascists, white supremacists, election deniers, and Christian nationalists, should raise serious red flags. CPAC Mexico is a two-day event, but it has a long-term vision for establishing and consolidating a Mexican clone of Trump’s Republican Party.

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